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Seraphic Fire adds richness, variety to sounds of Christmas

December 13, 2017 By Greg Stepanich — 0 Comments



Seraphic Fire in concert Saturday at All Souls Episcopal Church in Miami Beach. (Courtesy Seraphic Fire)

There have to be as many ways of exploring the music of the Christmas season as there are ways to celebrate the holiday, from indulging in the sounds of choirboys from a centuries-old English college to using Spotify or YouTube to find brand-new music for the year's end.

In the case of Seraphic Fire, you start with 13 expert singers and an adventurous approach, and you end up with something that is not so much an evening of favorite carols as it is a collection of Christmas art songs, old and new. The Miami concert choir's annual Christmas programs have become a cherished part of the concert season, and this year, the group is in the middle of doing no fewer than 10 of them virtually back to back, ending Sunday at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Center in Cutler Bay.

This past Saturday night at All Souls Episcopal in Miami Beach, a chilled but attentive and receptive audience filled most of the pews to hear a program, if they had been to earlier Seraphic Fire Christmas concerts, that featured pieces that have become staples of this annual event. Chief among them is Jesus Christ the Apple Tree, by the English composer Elizabeth Poston. This lovely carol, with its earnest 18th-century text, is as effective as it ever was in the way that the choir ends it: Singers fan out into the sides of the church and sing the last unharmonized melodic line in canon, with voices overlapping to pretty effect.

Also recurring this year was a piece whose text is devotional but not Christmas, the Gitanjali Chants of the American composer and choir director Craig Hella Johnson. Set in moody modal fashion to the words of the once hugely popular Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, it sounds ancient and modern all at once with its long, sinuous chant lines to Tagore's confessional text, gently supported by vocal drones and capped at the

coda with rich, dark chords. It was well-sung and hypnotic, but it doesn't fit so well in a Christmas program, though conductor James Bass has made a case for it for years.

That said, it did fit well in a set that included a well-known Catholic motet (also non-Christmas), Maurice Duruflé's *Ubi caritas*, sweetly sung, and Hildegard von Bingen's *Caritas abundat*, in which something of the austere joy of medieval worship practices came through. Also part of this group was the Minnesota-based American composer Matthew Culloton's *Balulalow*, an easy-on-the-ears setting of a 16th-century poem of Mary singing to the child in which the choir unfolded plenty of vocal warmth.

In that same vein of pop-influenced contemporary classical was *Spotless Rose*, by the Norwegian (now based in New York) composer Ola Gjeilo, sung before an attractive new setting of the *O magnum mysterium* text by Jason Burke. Both works gave the audience a good example of how well these singers can blend their voices, which they then heard in even richer fashion with the British composer and singer Peter Gritton's lush arrangement of Hugh Martin's classic *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, expansively and beautifully sung.

Two African-American spirituals, *Mary Had a Baby* and *Ain't-a That Good News*, both in the standard William Dawson arrangements, offered an evangelical fervor at strong contrast with the fruitcake *Gemütlichkeit* of some of the program, though the fine soprano Sara Guttenberg, a Seraphic Fire veteran, veered flat Saturday in her solo work on *Mary Had a Baby*, pulling the pitch of the piece down at the end. And Jeff Funk's arrangement of Tchaikovsky's *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*, with onomatopoeic lyrics and the chorus bending their knees and then straightening in oom-pah fashion for visual accompaniment was a crowd-pleaser if not very nourishing musically.

The deepest parts of the program came in what is standard repertory for this group, two pieces by Tomas Luis de Victoria – the well-known *O magnum mysterium* and *Regina coeli, laetare* – and William Byrd's *Lullaby My Sweet Little Baby*, with its melancholy melodic lines and a text riddled with fear over the menace of King Herod. In these pieces, as in Canadian composer Healey Willan's *Hodie Christus natus est*, which opened the evening, Seraphic Fire's most emblematic excellence could be heard: Impeccably trained musicians navigating with luminous skill difficult but nonpareil repertoire, imbuing it with the kind of life that only first-rate singers can give it.

Seraphic Fire can be heard tonight in its Christmas program at the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach; Thursday at Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church in Naples; Friday at St. Gregory's Episcopal in Boca Raton; and Sunday at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center in Cutler Bay. For more information, call 305-285-9060 or visit seraphicfire.org.